



Heather Francisco, Adult Advocate

Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury

HB 5593, An Act Concerning Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

Hello members of the committee; my name is Heather Francisco and I am an adult advocate at Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury. Thank you for allowing me to offer my testimony in support of HB 5593, An Act Concerning Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. There are two particular sections that I would like to speak about.

In my role as an advocate I work with survivors of sexual abuse and their families. Many of my clients have been refused or denied a restraining order based on the relationship of their assailant. Connecticut is behind the times on this issue, currently, Connecticut law prevents survivors of sexual assault, who are assaulted by a friend, acquaintance, or stranger, from getting a restraining order. The majority of survivors I work with are assaulted by a friend or acquaintance making them ineligible for this protection. Last year I worked with a woman who was assaulted by an acquaintance. She desperately wanted a restraining order but was not eligible based on current relationship parameters. As a result she felt it necessary to relocate in order to avoid any contact with her assailant. This is not the typical case; most of my clients do not have the resources to relocate and are forced to face their assailant daily. My hope is that these individuals will be afforded the same protections under the law as other sexual assault survivors. The lack of such legal protection leaves these individuals living in fear. It is difficult to go about your day to day activities after an assault without legal protection. Although not all survivors may choose to file for a Temporary Restraining Order, this law will give them the opportunity to regain control and increase their safety. The option of restraining order would also help survivors to feel empowered. Giving them this power of choice would help promote healing after an

experience that taken this away. A restraining order would also allow survivors to feel more at ease by offering support and protection in a difficult time. Please help this underserved population by updating our current laws to allow all sexual assault survivors to get a restraining order.

The other part of the bill I would like to speak about is having Family Violence Victim Advocates in Civil Court. Currently, Safe Haven advocates at our main office try to assist victims with a TRO application whenever possible. We assist about 200 victims/year. These are often clients who walk in without an appointment. By having an advocate in civil court, clients would be assured that they would receive prompt attention in filing the application. In addition to the application process, victims often have numerous questions about the protection provided by the order and how the order will be served. A civil court advocate would be able to explain how to complete the application and how to access the Marshal to serve the papers. In addition, victims are often terrified to go into court for the hearing date. They are afraid to confront their abuser, afraid that he may have an attorney or not even know what to expect from the hearing. Having an advocate there to help navigate this system would be of great benefit to any victim.

Thank you again for your time and attention to this very important bill. I hope you will vote in favor of HB 5593, An Act Concerning Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.